

Ping-Pong Gap

By Art Buchwald

It's very rare that the CIA gets caught flatfooted, but the other day when Red China invited the United States to send a table-tennis team to Peking, the Central Intelligence Agency discovered it had no champion ping-pong players in the organization whom it could send along on the trip.

CIA officials were going crazy trying to find someone before the U.S. team left for Peking last Saturday.

In panic, the CIA officials decided to hold a crash program in ping-pong. Neighbors who live around Langley, Va., where the top-secret agency is located, reported seeing truckloads of ping-pong tables going through the gates.

They have reported that they can't sleep at night because of the noise of thousands of balls being hit back and forth across the tables set up in the CIA gymnasium.

Any agent who ever played ping-pong in boy's camp or at the beach had been given leave from his regular duties and brought to Langley in hopes he might be developed into a champion ping-pong player before the U.S. team took off for Peking.

The CIA also held an Employees' Ping-Pong Tournament during lunch hour with cash prizes of up to \$100,000 of unaccountable funds to encourage more people to take up the sport.

Yet, despite these desperate measures, officials of the agency are pessimistic that they'll be able to develop anybody worthy of playing Red China at table tennis.

"What difference does it make if he isn't a champion?" I asked a CIA official.

"We have a serious problem," he said. "This is the first time we're playing Red China at any sport. Table tennis is the most important game in China."

"The USIA and the State Department want the United States to field the best team it can find, because they believe that if we can defeat the Chinese at ping-pong, it would be the greatest propaganda victory of the Cold War."

"On the other hand, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the CIA feel it would be better to send a mediocre team and risk defeat in exchange for finding out what Mao-Tse-Tung is *really* thinking."

"The ideal, of course, would be to send a champion ping-pong player who also can figure out what is going on in Peking. But so far we can't find anybody."

"Why is that?" I asked. "Surely in this vast organization you must have some excellent table-tennis players."

"Unfortunately, most of our agents are golfers," he said sadly. "We also have some tennis players and a few people who play croquet. But no one here ever thought to recruit ping-pong players."

"Couldn't you borrow a champion player from another agency of the government?"

"The only one who could have qualified was a man who worked for the FBI and had won the intercollegiate ping-pong championship of 1956. But, unfortunately, he was fired a month ago for telling a friend he didn't like J. Edgar Hoover's barber."

"Then it looks like the United States table tennis team may have to go to Peking without CIA representation?" I said.

"Unless we can come up with a sleeper," the official said. "Our recruiters are out on the college campuses right now and their orders are to find someone, anyone. It doesn't make any difference if he can pass a security clearance, as long as he has a vicious backhand."

Will anyone be punished because the CIA was unprepared to provide an agent for the Red China table tennis tournament?" I asked.

"Our personnel director was demoted and transferred to Iceland the other day, but at the last minute President Nixon commuted his sentence."